

Knowing and Doing Good

by Thomas Watson

Knowing to do good but not doing it is a heinous sin, and those who commit it are the most guilty.

Scripture: Numbers 15:30, Proverbs 13:13, Isaiah 1:15, Jeremiah 9:3, Hosea 4:6, Luke 16:10, Romans 12:2, Philippians 1:9, Colossians 3:10, James 4:17

Topics: "Conscience And Sin", "Christian Obedience"

Description

Thomas Watson preaches about the importance of knowing and doing good, emphasizing that sinning knowingly and presumptuously is a heinous offense before God. He explains that to sin against conscience and refuse to do good when one knows better is a grave sin that leads to greater punishment. Watson urges believers to be well-informed of their duties, to practice what they know is good, and to avoid presumptuous sins that harden the heart and lead to despair and self-condemnation.

Transcript

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"To him who knows to do good, and does it not--to him it is sin." James 4:17

The Apostle James, in former verses, had met with a sin common in those days, a sinful boasting among men, verse 13-14, "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." You may be in your graves before tomorrow! A mist cannot continue long--it is raised by the sun--and dispersed by the wind. Such is your life--a mist, a vapor, a short breath, a flying shadow--which "appears for a little while and then vanishes!" Well might they say, "What need do we have to be taught such a plain lesson? Who doesn't know all of this--that life is a vapor, and that we ought not to boast what we will do tomorrow?"

The Apostle seems in the text to meet with them by way of answer, "Do you know all this? Then the greater is your sin--that you don't do it. "To him who knows to do good, and does it not--to him it is sin."

I shall only explain this phrase, "to him it is sin"; that is, it is a heinous sin.

Every infirmity, everything which falls short of the rule, is sin--much more that which contradicts the rule. This man's sin has an emphasis; it is a crimson sin, and it shall have a greater punishment. "The servant will be severely punished, for though he knew his duty, he refused to do it!" Luke 12:47. If he who sins ignorantly is damned--then he who sins knowingly shall be doubly damned!

I. Doctrine implied--we ought to know to do good. We ought to know our duty.

II. We ought not only to know to do good but to do it.

III. He who knows to do good and does it not is, of all others, the most guilty.

I. Doctrine implied--we ought to know to do good. We ought to be well-informed of those things which are to be done by us in order to salvation. The written Word is a rule of knowledge--and the preached Word is a commentary upon the written Word. Both of them are to enrich our understanding and to nurture us up in the knowledge of that which is good. The reasons why we should know to do good are:

1. Knowledge is our lamp and star to guide us in the truth. It shows us what we are to do--and what we are to leave undone. If we do not know that which is good--we can never practice it.

2. Knowledge is the foundation of all grace. "Those who know your name, will put their trust in you," Psalm 9:10. "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight." Philippians 1:9 The Apostle joins these two, knowledge and perseverance. Such as are unlearned will be unstable.

3. The chief work in conversion consists in knowledge. Romans 12:2, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The mind being renewed, the man is transformed. The first part of God's image consists in knowledge, Colossians 3:10.

4. There is nothing in religion, though ever so excellent, which can do us good without knowledge.

USE. See how necessary it is to get the knowledge of what is good; it ushers in salvation, 1 Timothy 2:4. Ignorance of God is the cause of all sin! "They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me," Jeremiah 9:3. Ignorance of God damns! "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Hosea 4:6. It is sad to be ignorant in gospel-times; but many, alas, do not only not know God--but they are not willing to know. Jeremiah 9:6, "They refuse to know Me, says the Lord."

II. DOCTRINE. We ought not only to know to do good--but to do it. This the Apostle implies, "to him that knows to do good, and does it not...." He implies, that he who knows to do good should do it. The end of knowledge, is practice. Search from one end of the Bible to the other--and you will find that it is the practical part of religion which is chiefly intended. The crown is not set upon the head of knowledge, but practice. Revelation 22:14, "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life."

USE 1. It shows us wherein most professors are defective in the times of gospel, namely, in the doing part of religion. They know how to do good--but do it not. They know they should abstain from evil

and pursue holiness, but, though they know this--yet they do it not.

1. They know they should abstain from evil. Thus they know they should not swear, Matthew 5:34, "Do not swear at all"; yet they swear. They are more free with their oaths than their alms. They know immorality to

be a sin--that it wastes the body, wounds the conscience, blots the name, and damns the soul! Galatians 5:19. Yet they will go on in that sin and, for a cup of pleasure, drink a sea of wrath! They know drunkenness to be a sin, that it makes them like beasts, takes away their reason, makes them unfit for happiness, for they cannot think of going reeling to heaven. They know that God is preparing a cup of wrath for the drunkard, Revelation 16:19. Yet for all that, they will not leave their cups.

Men know that rash censuring is a sin. James 4:11, "Do not speak evil one of another, brethren"; yet they are guilty of this. They will not swear--but they will slander and speak to the harm of others. No physician can heal the wounds of the tongue!

They know they should not vent their passions, James 1:26, "If any man among you seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, this man's religion is vain." Origen observes that the rich man in the Gospel had no water to cool his tongue. He had sinned most in his tongue; therefore, he was punished most in it. How unworthy is it for men to have their eyes and hands lifted up to heaven--and their tongues set on fire from hell; at one time praying, and another time cursing! How can such pray in a family, who are possessed with an angry devil?

Thus they know that covetousness is a sin, yes, the root of all evil; yet the world engrosses all their time and thoughts. They thirst after gold more than grace; and labor more to have a full purse than a good conscience.

Thus men know they should abstain from evil--but they don't do it.

2. They know they should pursue holiness--but they don't do it. They know they should read the Word, use holy conference, pray in their families, redeem the time, and walk circumspectly. They know to do good--but don't do it.

QUESTION. How is it that men know to do good--yet do it not?

ANSWER 1. It is for lack of sound conviction. Men are not thoroughly convinced of the necessity of practical godliness. They think there is a necessity of knowledge, because otherwise there is no salvation. They will get some notions of Christ, that He is a Savior, and has satisfied divine justice, and they hope they believe in Him. Well, then; we tell them that faith and obedience go together. Then they say that God is merciful and, though they are not as good as they should be, free grace will save them. Thus men content themselves with general notions of religion--but are not convinced of the practical part of godliness.

ANSWER 2. Men know to do good yet do it not--because they are not awakened out of their spiritual sloth. It is easy to get the knowledge of a truth, to give assent to it, to commend it, and to profess it. But to digest knowledge into practice, is the difficulty.

ANSWER 3. Men know to do good but do it not--through unbelief; they are, in part, atheists. If they truly believed that sin was so bitter, that wrath and hell followed it--would they not leave off their sins? If they believed that to do the will of God was a privilege, religion was their interest, that there is joy in the way of godliness, and heaven at the end--would they not espouse holiness? But people, though they have some slight transient thoughts of these things--yet are not brought to the sincere belief of them. Therefore, though they know to do good--yet they do it not. The reason why there are so few doers of the Word--is because there are so few true believers.

ANSWER 4. Men know to do good but do it not--because the knowledge in their head never works into their hearts. It does not quicken them, nor warm their affections with love to the truth.

ANSWER 5. Men know to do good but do it not--because of a prejudiced opinion. The things to be done in religion are judged to be too strict and severe; they restrain sin too much or they press too much to holiness.

ANSWER 6. Men know to do good yet do it not--because they love their sin more than they love the Word. Hosea 4:8, "They set their heart on their iniquity." Some content themselves with having means of knowledge, judges 17:13, "Then said Micah, Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest." But what is one the better to know what medicine he should take--if he does not actually take it?

USE 2. Of exhortation. Let me beseech you all who have been hearers of the Word, and have gotten a great measure of knowledge, that, as you know to do good--you would do it. Practice is the soul of religion. Luther says, "I had rather do the will of God, than be able to work miracles."

First, to do what you know--evidences your noble relation to Christ. You count it an honor to be near allied to the crown--but it is more honor to be akin to Christ.

Second, to know to do good and to do it--sets a crown upon the gospel. Romans 16:19, "Everyone has heard about your obedience;" not your knowledge--but your obedience. To know to do good and not to do it--hardens others in sin, scandalizes religion, and makes people ready to turn atheists.

When some of the Spaniards came to Hispaniola, the Spaniards' lives being loose and profane--the Indians asked them what God they served? They answered, "The God of heaven." The Indians replied, "Surely your God is not a good God, who has such bad servants." Thus, to know to do good yet do it not--puts a scar in the face of religion, and brings an evil report upon it. But to do what we know--trumpets forth the fame of the gospel, and makes those who oppose it to admire it.

Third, to know to do good and to do it--entitles you to blessedness. James 1:25, "He shall be blessed in his deed"; not for the deed--but in the deed.

III. DOCTRINE. That he who knows to do good and does it not--is, of all others, the most guilty. To him it is sin--crimson sin. That is, it is heinous sin, capital sin, sin emphatically, sin with a witness, and punished with a vengeance!

QUESTION. What is it to sin presumptuously?

ANSWER. To sin presumptuously is to sin against the light which shines in a man's conscience, when a man is convinced that those things he does are sin. Conscience says, "Oh, do not this great evil!" Conscience, like the cherubim, has a flaming sword in its hand to frighten and deter the sinner--yet he will pluck the forbidden fruit! This is to sin presumptuously. This sin is highly aggravating for two reasons:

First, because sinning presumptuously against conscience--is after counsels, admonitions, and warnings. Such a person cannot say he was never told of his sin; he has had ministers rising up early who have told him what a damnable thing sin was--yet he ventured on. So now he has no excuse. John 15:22, "Now you have no cloak for your sin."

Second, it is an aggravation to sin presumptuously against conscience, when it is after afflictions. After God has made him hear the voice of the rod, He has made him to feel sin bitter, to read his sin in his punishment--yet he sins! His sin was following evil company, and God has punished him for it. He has almost wasted his estate with riotous living, or he has almost drunk himself blind--yet he will not leave his sin! His sin was immorality, and his body is diseased and full of noxious humors; yet, though he feels the smart of sin, he retains the love of sin. Here is an aggravation of sin, 2 Chronicles 28:22, "In his time of trouble, King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord."

USE 3. To know what is good, yet not to do it--is to sin presumptuously. This sin is full of obstinacy and stubbornness. It is so because men can say nothing in excuse for their sin--they can make no defense for themselves--yet they are resolved to hold fast their iniquity like those in Jeremiah 18:12, "We will continue to live as we want to, following our own evil desires."

USE 4. Take heed of presumptuous sin! If God has been so terrible against sins of infirmity and anger, as we see in Moses and Uzziah--Oh, how fierce will His anger be, against the presumptuous sinner! Better never to have known the ways of God than to know and not to do them! Oh! as you love your souls, take heed of this.

1. Presumptuous sins are desperate sins--because they are committed with much premeditation and forethought. The

presumptuous sinner does not sin unaware--but he projects and casts in his mind how to bring his sin about, as Joseph's brethren did, in betraying him; or as Judas did, in betraying Christ; or as those Jews did, who laid wait for Paul.

2. Presumptuous sins are desperate--because they are accompanied with pride. The sinner who knows the mind of God--yet will act contrary to it, says, like Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him!"

3. Presumptuous sins are desperate--because they are accompanied with impudency. Such sinners are hardened, fearless, and without shame. Like Judas, they are hardened; though woes are pronounced against them--they will sin! They are without fear, like the leviathan, job 41:33, and they have sinned away shame. Zephaniah 3:5, "The wicked know no shame." He has a forehead of brass. Nay, some are so far from blushing--that they glory in their shame! Philippians 3:19.

4. To sin presumptuously, to know what is good yet not to do it, is heinous--because it is ingratitude. It is a high abuse of God's kindness--and God cannot endure, of all things, to have His kindness abused. God's kindness is seen in this: that He has acquainted the sinner with his mind and will, that He has not only instructed him--but persuaded him. He has made mercy stoop and kneel to the sinner. He has wooed him with His Spirit--that he would flee from sin and pursue holiness. Kindness is seen in that God has spared the sinner so long and not struck him dead in the act of sin! Kindness is seen in that, though the sinner has sinned against his conscience--yet now, if he will repent of sin, God will repent of His judgments and mercy shall be held forth. Jeremiah 3:1, "You have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to Me, says the Lord." But the sinner is not melted with all this love. His heart, like clay, hardens under the sun. Here is a great abuse of God's kindness, and God cannot endure to have His kindness abused. As the vulture draws sickness from perfumes--so the sinner contracts wickedness from the mercy of God. Here is high ingratitude!

5. To sin presumptuously, to know what is good yet not to do it--is a contempt done to God. He cares not whether God is pleased or not--he will have his sin! Therefore, the presumptuous sinner is said to blaspheme God, Numbers 15:30, "Anyone who sins defiantly, blasphemes the Lord". By his presumptuous sin, he acts as if God was either ignorant and did not know his wickedness; or impotent and was not able to punish him. How horrid is this! There is a kind of blasphemy against God--in every presumptuous sin.

6. To sin presumptuously, to know what is good yet not to do it--is a bold contest with God--a daring of God to punish! The man who sins against conscience presumptuously and will not be reclaimed, in effect says, "What do I care for God's commands? They shall be no check upon me--but I will go on in sin and let God do His worst."

A godly man is said to fear the commandment, Proverbs 13:13. He dares not sin because the law of God stands in his way: but the presumptuous sinner does not value the commandment. He will sin in spite of God's law. Oh, desperate madness--to dare God to His face! 1 Corinthians 10:22, "Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?" Good reason, then, that we should take heed of presumptuous sin, since it is so heinous and desperate! "To him that knows to do good--yet does it not, to him it is sin"; it is heinous and presumptuous sin!

USE 5. Trial. Let us examine if we are not guilty of sinning thus presumptuously, knowing to do good--yet not to do it.

Is it not to sin presumptuously--when we live in the total neglect of duty? We know we ought to pray in our families--yet we do it not. To live in the neglect of family duties--is not this to sin presumptuously?

Is it not to sin presumptuously, when we will venture upon the same sins which we condemn in others? Romans 2. You condemn another for pride--and yet you live in that sin yourself. A father condemns his son for swearing--yet he himself swears. The master reproves his servant for being drunk--yet he himself will be drunk. Is not this to sin presumptuously, to live in those sins which we condemn in others!

Do not they sin presumptuously against conscience--who will sin in spite of heaven? Though they see the judgments of God executed on others--yet will adventure on the same sins. Daniel 5:22, "And you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this"; that is, you saw the judgments I inflicted on your father.

Do not they sin presumptuously, they who know to do good yet do it not--who labor to stifle the convictions of their conscience and will not let conscience speak freely to them? This the Scripture calls "holding the truth in unrighteousness," Romans 1:18.

Do not they sin presumptuously who, after they have felt the smart of sin--it has bred a worm in their conscience, and a moth in their estate--yet, after all this, they again embrace their sins.

That I may show you what you have to fear, and that I may beat you off from presumptuous sins--let these things be seriously laid to heart:

1. These presumptuous sins greatly harden the heart. These are two of the greatest blessings--a sound judgment and a soft heart. But sinning presumptuously and knowingly, congeals and hardens the heart. It both wastes the conscience and sears it, 1 Timothy 4:2. By sinning knowingly, a person gets a habit of sin; and the habit of sinning takes away the sense of sinning. Ephesians 4:19, "Being past feeling." Tell the

presumptuous sinner that there are treasures of wrath laid up for him, he fears not; his heart is like a piece of marble which will take no impression. When men know to do good yet do it not--their hearts are hardened insensibly, and that is dangerous.

2. Such as sin presumptuously, or they who know to do good yet do it not, are self-condemned. Titus 3:11. The sinner knows in his conscience, that he is guilty. He knows that he has sinned against warnings, education, and conviction. Therefore, his own heart must, and does condemn him. And when God judges and condemns him, he will exonerate God, "You are right when You pass sentence; You are blameless when You judge." Psalm 51:4.

3. Presumptuous sins make deep wounds in the soul. They lead to despair, and despair is the agony of the soul. The atheist Spira, in despair, was like a living man in hell. Despair sucked out his marrow and vital blood; it made him a skeleton. The sinner goes on stubbornly--yet his foolish heart tells him all will be well; but, when God begins to set his sins in order before him, and conscience, which was before like a lion asleep, begins to be awakened and roars upon him and he sees death and hell before him--now his heart faints! His presumption is turned to despair--and he cries out as Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" Genesis 4:13. Now the sinner begins to think with himself thus, "I would have my sins and I had them; and now I have the wrath of God upon me for them! Oh, how foolish was I to refuse instruction! But it is too late now! The mercy-seat is quite covered with clouds. I am shut out from all hope of mercy; my wounds are such that the balm of Gilead will not heal!" The more presumption in the sins of this life--the more eternal despair.

4. If a person knows to do good and does not to do it, if a person sins presumptuously, God may, in just judgment, leave such a one to himself. It is a terrible thing when God shall say, "You have, by your presumptuous sin, affronted Me and provoked Me to My face! Therefore, I will give you up to your own heart. You shall sin still; seeing you will be filthy--you shall be filthy still."

5. To know what is good yet not to do it, to sin presumptuously, is a great degree of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Such as sin presumptuously, sin willfully. Though presumption is not final apostasy--yet it comes very near to it; and a little more sin will make you so guilty, that there remains no more sacrifice for sin. To sin presumptuously against light may, in time, bring on malice and despite to the Spirit; as it was with Julian, who threw up his dagger in the air as if he would be revenged on God. When once it comes to this--there is but one step lower a man can fall--and that is into hell.

6. There is little hope for such as know to do good yet do it not, who know what is evil but will not forbear. There were sacrifices for sins of ignorance--but no sacrifices for sins of presumption, Numbers 15:30. Indeed, presumptuous sinners hope all will be well, Proverbs 14:16, "The fool rages and is confident." Such a fool is spoken of Deuteronomy 29:19-20, "When he hears the words of this curse, he blesses himself in his heart saying, 'I am safe, even though I am walking in my own stubborn way.' The Lord will not pardon such people. His anger and jealousy will burn against them. All the curses written in this book will come down on them, and the Lord will erase their names from under heaven!"

7. Such as sin presumptuously, who know to do good yet do it not, who know what is evil yet will not forbear it--God refuses all their services--whether reading, hearing, praying, or communicating. God abhors their sacrifice. Isaiah 1:15, "When you make many prayers--I will not hear; your hands are full of blood." And Hosea 8:13, "The people of Israel love their rituals of sacrifice, but to me their sacrifices are all meaningless! I will call my people to account for their sins, and I will punish them."

Thus you see what cause you have to tremble, who are guilty of this sin; you see your misery. Besides all that has been said, consider these two things:

1. You who sin presumptuously, who know to do good and do it not, who know what is evil yet will not forbear--you cannot sin as cheaply as others.

Though sin will cost everyone dearly--yet it will cost you more dearly. You go directly against conscience; and, if there is either justice in heaven, or fire in hell--you shall be sure to be punished!

2. You who sin presumptuously cannot take so much pleasure in your sin as another may have. One whose conscience is less enlightened, though his sin will be bitter to him afterwards--yet at present he may roll it as honey under his tongue and find pleasure in it. But you who sin against your knowledge cannot have as much pleasure in sin as he--for your conscience will put forth a sting, and all the threatenings of the Word will set themselves in battle array against you so that you can have no quiet of conscience. That trouble which you feel now in your conscience, is but the beginning of sorrow!

QUESTION. What shall we do that we may not sin presumptuously against conscience?

ANSWER 1. Take heed of little sins. Though, to speak properly, there are no such things as little sins--there is no little treason. But I comparatively, one sin may be lesser than another. Take heed of little sins! The frequent committing of lesser sins, will prepare for greater sins. A lesser disease of the body, if it is left alone, prepares for a greater disease. Being unjust in a little, prepares for being unjust in much, Luke 16:10. Such as were, at first, more modest--yet, by accustoming themselves to lesser sins--by degrees their sins have grown up to a greater height of sin. Jail sins have begun as little sins!

ANSWER 2. If you would not sin presumptuously, knowingly and willfully--then reverence the dictates of conscience. Get conscience well-informed by the Word, as you set your watch by the sun--and then be ruled by it. Do nothing against conscience. If conscience says, "Do such a thing," though ever so unpleasing, set upon the duty. When conscience says, "Take heed of such a thing!" then do not come near the forbidden fruit! Conscience is God's deputy in the soul. The voice of conscience, is the voice of God. Do not trifle with checks of conscience, lest God allows you to harden in sin and, by degrees, come to presumptuous sin.

ANSWER 3. Labor to have your knowledge sanctified. Men sin against their knowledge, because their knowledge is not sanctified. Sanctified knowledge works upon the soul. It inclines us to do good. It makes us flee from sin. Sanctified knowledge is like a breastplate, which keeps the arrow or presumptuous sin from entering!

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